

There is an ancient legend about Thomas the disciple found in an old book called the Acts of Thomas. The book is certainly not authentic history, but in that legends ordinarily do have some basis in historical fact, the story it tells is interesting for what it infers about the character of the man.

Tradition has it that the disciples gathered in Jerusalem after the resurrection and divided the world among them for their missionary efforts. Thomas was assigned to India, but would not go. Jesus himself intervened, however, and arranged for Thomas to be sold to an Indian King as a builder and carpenter. When he arrived in India Thomas received money from the King in regular installments to build a new palace. But instead of buying building materials Thomas gave all the money to the poor and sick. One day the King called for Thomas and wanted to inspect his new palace. When he discovered that the work had not begun and that his money had been given away he had Thomas thrown in prison under the penalty of death. Thomas's word to him was: "Thou canst not see it now, but when thou departest this life, then shalt thou see it."

In the meantime a brother of the King died and when he arrived in heaven was shown about and asked where he would like to reside. He saw a grand and glorious palace and requested to live in its humblest room. But he was told that the Palace was reserved: "That is the palace which Thomas the Christian builded for thy brother". The brother understood; he requested and was granted permission to visit his brother the King in order to explain. As a result Thomas was released from prison, the King was baptized a Christian, and the disciple lived to work in India till his death as an old man.

That's the legend, and it is a charming one. In fact, the Gospel was preached in India quite early. When Vasco da Gama and his Portuguese explorers arrived in India about 1,500 A.D. they found the Christian Church already there, with a tradition attached to Thomas. That tradition has it that Thomas traveled as far as China. In any case, we are sure that there were Christians on the sub continent that is known as India as early as 500 A.D.: how they got there: who preached the

Gospel is all a matter of speculation. But all the traditions and legends lead to Thomas personally - or to his influence indirectly. (This information from Wm. Barclay, The Master's Men P. 47-56)

Not bad credentials for someone history remembers as the "doubter": not bad for someone whose name, "doubting Thomas" has become synonymous with skepticism and unbelief.

The first three Gospels tell us nothing about Thomas except his name. In the fourth Gospel a more complete portrait emerges.

He was, first, a man of considerable courage and loyalty. In John 11, Jesus is preparing to go to Bethany at the death of his friend Lazarus. To the disciples the proposed trip was suicidal given Bethany's proximity to Jerusalem, and they protested, and almost backed out on him. It was Thomas, according to John's Gospel who said: "Let us also go, that we may die with him". (John 11:16) And so they went.

He was, second, a brutally honest man. In the Fourth Gospel account of the Last Supper had told the disciples what has become one of his best loved sayings: "...Trust in God: trust also in me. There are many dwelling places in my father's house where I am you also may be: and my way then is known to you." It was Thomas who broke in; "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?": to which Jesus replied: "I am the way: I am the truth and I am the life." (John 14:1-6)

It takes a great deal of courage to be that honest under those circumstances. How often have you sat in a meeting and not understood what was said, or what was done, and found it easier to remain silent rather than asking an embarrassing question? I have - but I try not to. A senior high student once asked me about the way we begin our service: "Why did God create us? To Praise him forever" Is that true? Do we really believe that? she asked. And I think the ensuing conversation helped her to understand a little bit about liturgy and symbolic language. Thomas was honest, and it is to his everlasting credit that he asked that question of our Lord.

Third, he was a skeptical man. Some people are like that by nature: some learn

to be skeptical as a protective device: some enjoy the role of resident skeptic because it makes others feel vain and gullible. For whatever reason Thomas was skeptical. He wanted to see before he believed: he wanted a ninety day trial period before he bought. We heard the story this morning. Briefly - he wasn't present when the Risen Christ appeared to the disciples: and furthermore he wasn't about to buy it when they breathlessly told him about the experience. I confess to a great deal of sympathy with Thomas at this point. I wouldn't have believed it either. I had a telephone call from a woman one time who felt that her house was inhabited by spirits: and I had to restrain myself from saying what I was feeling: namely - I don't believe it. My daughter came home from her first and last experience in a neighborhood prayer and Bible study group for children talking about someone seeing an angel and the head of Christ appearing on the side of a mountain through the fog and a miraculous healing from burns suffered at a Charcoal grill - and my response put me shoulder to shoulder with Thomas. I don't believe it.

Unlike Thomas's experience, however, I do not expect these stories to be confirmed: and I fervently wish that the sponsors of these activities would do some hard thinking about the ethics involved in exploiting childhood imagination and be a little more concerned about the work of Jesus Christ rather than their celestial scorecard of souls saved.

In any case, for Thomas, seeing was believing. And he would not believe until he could see and feel and test with his own senses the validity of the proposed theses that Jesus had risen from his grave.

History has dealt unfairly with Thomas, I believe. I have already revealed my sympathies with him: and, in fact, he sounds like a lot of people I know.

Thomas could well qualify for the title Patron Saint of Contemporary America. Let's think about that for a minute.

There has always been a degree of skepticism built into the American character. Political scientists have suggested that totalitarianism could never happen here because it depends on the people swallowing, hook, line and sinker, every word the dictator breathes. And Americans are notorious for not believing much of anything

their political leaders tell them. Hitler couldn't have sold Mein Kampf in America because people would have said, "Oh yeah? Prove it!"

That peculiarly American skepticism is, in my opinion, one of our greatest natural resources. Of course there are extremes. Some people will watch the Appollo 16 shot today and believe that it's all staged in a Houston laboratory. But even that excess is healthy at heart. In a day of nearly unfathomable bigness in Corporations and Governmental Agencies, Labor Unions, and the Press Establishment - skepticism may be the only thing that preserves our system. For who but the skeptic will think to question the Pentagon reports of progress in S. E. Asia, or the arrangements between the oil industry and Senators of both parties? Who but the doubting Thomas will save us from the kind of economy that cuts the heart out of education and public welfare and penal reform in the name of saving us money. We need the skeptic who will respond to tax reform proposals: "Prove it - show me".

On the other hand there is a kind of skepticism that is unhealthy and demeaning and ultimately destructive: the kind that will not believe anything: that focuses a jaundiced eye on every effort - every promise - every commitment: the kind that indulges in that ultimate delusion that "it doesn't matter whether you vote or not because they're all crooked." Skepticism is healthy until it becomes despair.

In matters religious skepticism can play a very creative role. When Thomas told Jesus he didn't understand, he opened the door for clarity and growth. For Jesus went on to point out that the way may remain unknown - but that he, Jesus, was going to travel it with them and for them. In that context, I think it is incumbent that we learn to say to each other: "I don't understand that: please explain : and I think the healthiest thing that can ever happen to a preacher is for one of his people to challenge him: to tell him "that wasn't clear", or "I don't think I believe that".

I think it is essentially 'very healthy for the world to be a little skeptical' when it looks at the church: to say to the church: "show us: prove that you are really for peace and forgiveness and love and not something else. On the other

side of it I think it is very healthy for a Church to be just a little skeptical about the verbal commitments of its own members, and to say to them "prove it: be a member in some way other than a name on a role."

I think a little skepticism is healthy, but at this point we need to see that there is another dynamic operating in the realm of religion: that is, a need for certainty. In a day of general uncertainty people want very badly to believe something that is stable and unchanging. Sensing this need and this want, there are a growing number of churches that are making fantastic numerical progress, and a lot of noise, creating the conditions under which religious certainty may be confirmed and religious experience may be felt by all. That, I believe is the great appeal of the Jesus movement: of the Campus Crusade for Christ: of the speaking in tongues movement, and to a degree, of Billy Graham himself. If somehow we can find in religion something that is certain. If we can find one area in life where all doubts may be put aside: if we can do it in a way that is mutually felt by all. That is a contemporary formula for ecclesiastical success. And it bothers me: but what bothers me more is that churches that play it straight, that try to be honest when it would be convenient to lie a little bit, come off feeling inadequate. What bothers me is that people, like you and me, who have not had one of these staged and intensely emotional experiences sometimes feel as if we are a sub-category of Christian when talking with someone who has.

And so I'd like simply to measure that against Thomas and his experience. Jesus did not criticize Thomas for wanting proof. Never once did Jesus admonish his disciples not to doubt. And I conclude that doubt plays a role in faith: that if there is no doubt in faith then we're not talking about faith at all: we're talking about knowledge. I have come to believe that a Christian who realizes his integrity will learn to live with doubt: that he will learn that to trust in God means to trust in the face of doubt: to have faith in Jesus Christ means to have that faith in spite of the skepticism that keeps welling up inside.

Finally, Thomas's faith was confirmed in the fellowship of believers. I'd love to know why he wasn't there the first time around: where he was when the

resurrection appearance happened to the others. Skeptic that he was I can imagine him walking the city streets, disillusioned, recklessly endangering his own life, because the one thing that was certain was gone. Well, wherever he was, he was enabled to believe when he returned to the fellowship of believers. That's important. It is difficult to believe let's admit that. There are times when we can think of more reasons not to believe: when the only honest thing to do seems to be to withdraw from the fellowship and go our lonely way.

That's one of the most important functions of the church. We help each other believe here. In hymns and prayers, we help each other affirm what on a given Sunday we can't affirm alone. In personal relationships that transmit love and care we tell each other the Gospel, and support each other in times of doubt. I've had seasons of doubt: I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that. I've had mornings when the prospect of worship and preaching was less than thrilling. But inevitably something happens here. I can believe because you can believe: I can rejoice because you rejoice. I can praise God because the congregation of which I am a part is praising him.

I don't think I have said that very well. But I think that's part of what happened to Thomas when he returned to the fellowship of believers. The reality of Jesus Christ was sealed and confirmed for him in a way that would never have happened alone, on the street. So, it happens for me and I trust for you.

As is the case with you and me, Thomas was no stained-glass saint. He was, rather, an honest, skeptical, totally human disciple of Jesus Christ: the one to whom our Lord said, "because you have seen me you have faith" -: the one to whom our Lord said - about you and me - "Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith." AMEN.

Father, help us to believe when we have not seen. Help us to support each other as we struggle with the perplexities of our faith. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN